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Security Agency Bars Access to Nonsecret Material, Library Records Show

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WASHINGTON, April 27 — The National Security Agency, the nation's largest and most secretive intelligence organization, has directed a private library in Virginia to halt public access to personal letters mentioned in a book critical of the agency, according to library records.

In a visit to the George C. Marshall Research Library in Lexington, Va., earlier this month, according to library officials, two representatives of the security agency also put a "secret" rubber-stamp on some of the letters, which were written by a former agency official but were never Government property. Library officials said the security agency instructed them to place the letters, including many without the secrecy stamp, in a vault the library uses to house secret data.

Many of the letters were cited by the author James Bamford in his book "The Puzzle Palace," a critical report about the agency that was published last year. The National Security Agency is responsible for devising and keeping secure codes used by the United States, breaking encryption systems used by foreign governments and monitoring worldwide communications.

Removal Termed 'Routine'

Lieut. Gen. Lincoln D. Faurer, director of the agency, defended the removal of the letters from public access, calling it a "routine" part of the agency's "responsibility to advise and assist in the protection of N.S.A.-related national security information" contained in library collections.

Scholars and civil liberties lawyers, asked this week about the agency's action, denounced it, in the words of one, as "a new form of censorship."

Mark H. Lynch, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, said, "When the Government starts barring the public from seeing unclassified documents in private libraries, it's an extraordinary form of censorship."

Historians and lawyers said they had never before heard of a case in which open research materials mentioned in a published book were later classified secret or removed from circulation. They also questioned the N.S.A.'s authority to declare secret or otherwise influence the status of documents that were never the property of the Government. Officials of the security agency assert that it does have such authority to protect national security information.

Excessive Secrecy Charged

While they were at the Marshall library, N.S.A. officials told the library that the visit was part of a systematic effort to track down and, if necessary, remove from public circulation research materials about sensitive matters that were used in Mr. Bamford's book, library officials said.

Mr. Bamford is a Massachusetts writer who has a law degree and specializes in investigative research. "The Puzzle Palace," the first book-length account of the security agency's history and activities, accuses the agency of maintaining excessive secrecy and abusing its powers of electronic surveillance by spying on American citizens in the 1970's.

Mr. Bamford said the recent actions would "have a very chilling effect on any historical researcher."

The letters removed from open library shelves were written from 1942 to 1969 by William F. Friedman, a pioneer in cryptological work in the United States and one of the security agency's top code breakers. They dealt primarily with personal matters, according to library officials.

The letters contained brief references to some cryptologic work, including one project in 1957 that the agency still considers highly sensitive, according to Mr. Bamford's book, but were never subject to secrecy classification because they were part of Mr. Friedman's private papers. Mr. Friedman died in 1969 and donated his private papers to the Marshall library.

In a letter last month to Marshall S. Carter, a former director of the agency and president of the foundation that oversees the Marshall library, General Faurer described the visit by two N.S.A. officials as "part of our continuing review of research materials used by author James Bamford."

The letter also said, "It's obvious we share a common desire that collections of papers not be exploited unreasonably by researchers to expose classified or sensitive information, although this is often difficult to enforce."

Officials at the Marshall library, which is on the campus of the Virginia

Military Institute, called the agency's action "troublesome" but defended the library's relationship with the Government. "I've felt that our relationship with the Government has been reasonable, practical and helpful," said Fred L. Hadsel, director of the George C. Marshall Research Foundation.

General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff in World War II and later Secretary of State and founder of the European postwar recovery plan that bears his name, was a graduate of V.M.I.

Reagan Executive Order

Mr. Hadsel said the foundation's relationship with the Government "is not and should not be an adversarial relationship," and added: "Collections come from different people under different circumstances and different conditions. We are trying, step by step, to move toward an equitable opening of all our collections."

An executive order on national security information signed by President Reagan last year limited the definition of information subject to designation as secret as material "that is owned by, produced by or for, or is under the control of the United States Government."

Mr. Hadsel said the library removed the Carter papers from open access last year. He declined to say why. Mr. Bamford, who interviewed Mr. Carter while doing research for his book, said the Carter papers were withdrawn at the request of Mr. Carter after publication of "The Puzzle Palace." Mr. Carter could not be reached for comment today.

Records at the Marshall library show that a number of papers from the Friedman collection were withdrawn from public files at the instruction of the security agency.

A reporter who asked Monday to see several of the Friedman letters mentioned in Mr. Bamford's book was given the relevant files of correspondence. The specific letters, however, were missing; in their place were notices that the documents had been withdrawn for security reasons. In some cases, entire folders had been withdrawn.

For example, Mr. Friedman's correspondence with Boris C. W. Hagelin, a European manufacturer of cryptologic equipment, was missing from the collection. In place of the folder was a one-page notice stating that that the material had been removed because it contained "security-classified information" and had been designated as "For Official Use Only" by the security agency. There are several references to the

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